

# **THIEF OF FLESH**

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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# **ABSTRACT**

Thief of Flesh

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This project explores the effects of drug abuse and the role of culture and relationships on an individual's upbringing. Drug abuse is becoming an increasing problem in the world, which is not only bad for individuals, who experience terrible side effects as a result of opioid abuse, but it also affects others in proximity to abusers as well as the relationships they share. How does this use affect both the personalities and actions of users? In what ways do relationships change because of abuse and what role do they play in the development of both an individual's personality and their propensity to become an addict? Research was conducted through close readings on biographies of drug abusers, as well as scholarly articles on the effects of drug abuse. Additional readings were done on sources focusing on the culture of the Ojibwe tribe and their Wendigo legend, which was conducted to lead the fantasy aspect of the story. Through this research, I strove to answer the overarching question of how drug abuse and culture affect individuals and their relationships. Understanding these ties allows for awareness drug abuse effects and the role of healthy or abusive relationships on how a person develops. This research culminated in a novel about a young boy who is overtaken by an evil spirit, which is used as a metaphor for his drug addiction, and slowly degrades into something monstrous.

## **DEDICATION**

To my mother, who taught me the strength to chase happiness.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I would like to thank my faculty advisor, Dr. Jason Harris, for his continued support throughout my research, as well as his valued feedback on creative artifact.

Thanks also go to the members of my Aggie Creative Collective cohorts, who encourage me to write even when I don't know which words to say or feel that I am not good enough. Your friendship and feedback are invaluable to me. I also want to extend gratitude to the LAUNCH program, for allowing me to conduct this research and realize my dream of publishing my creative works.

Finally, thanks to my family, which include blood members and those I've collected over the years through rich friendships, who gave me the courage to capitalize on this wonderful opportunity and to seek after my dreams.

# SECTION I

## RESEARCH QUESTION/MOTIVATION/ARTIFACT

### Research Question

Substance abuse has been a prevalent factor in recorded human history. Drug use can occur for many reasons, including as coping mechanisms and as a gateway to a good time, but other effects are also prevalent. In my research, I want to focus on the effects of substance abuse on the users and those close to them. How does the abuser change as their use escalates? What effect does it have on the relationships around them? Analyzing these questions is important to understand the effects of this common occurrence on people, and my research and creative artifact strive to shed light on the area and show a real-life representation of it.

Further, my research also explores the Ojibwe tribe and its cultures. Specifically, my focus is on the Wendigo legend. The myth of the Wendigo has many variations, several of which I have taken inspiration from. The legend, in summation, follows the story of humans who resort to cannibalism because of either insanity or extreme hunger due to being lost in the wilderness. After consuming human flesh for the first time, the human is overtaken by the spirit of the Wendigo. Gradually transforming into a monster, they grow horns, their body stretches and becomes very tall and deathly thin, and their insatiable hunger for human meat continues to grow. This story is one of greed and anger, and my research attempts to understand the significance behind this legend. I strive to answer the questions of how normal humans have tendencies of acting on greed and hunger just as the characters in the legend do and what this says about mankind. Further, I hope to answer the question on how these stories came to be and how they influence the actions and thoughts of readers. Through my research of other portions of

the Ojibwe culture outside of the Wendigo legend, I hope to explore the exclusionary and restrictive cultural identity that many Indian reservations have and how this affects the younger generation.

### *Motivation*

The importance of answering these questions lies in the power the answers provide. Knowing how substance abuse may affect individuals and lives can create awareness for potential effects and allow them to make a more informed decision on whether they want to risk those effects. Further, people close to abusers can see how they are being affected and if their interactions with the abusers is positive and negative to both themselves and the user.

Through research, I found out how truly devastating drug abuse, specifically opioid addiction, can be. The use of opioids is considered an epidemic in America, and the high abuse rates can be attributed to the over prescription of the pain medicine. Over a dozen states are currently writing a higher number of prescriptions for opioids than there are residents in the state. This is extremely worrying, as opioids are highly addictive and can make users incur several negative side-effects. These include dizziness, nausea, tolerance, and respiratory depression, among others. With such a high potential for ruining the lives of abusers, it is important to understand not only what abusing these drugs can cause, but also how prevalent of a problem it is in order to try and prevent new cases and minimize the effects of the epidemic.

Further, my exploration of the Ojibwe cultures and myths is important in understanding near forgotten sects of human history and beliefs, as well as to understand how particular mindsets, such as an exclusionary tendency, can be both detrimental to younger generations. Moreover, the Wendigo myth mirrors the greed and anger that humans possess and recognizes these as sinister tendencies just as bad as the mythical monster itself. Understanding the origin of

these myths and what they were meant to represent provides insights into how others view the world as well as the tendencies that humans have always possessed.

### *Artifact*

To address the aforementioned questions, research conducted will be used to create a novel entitled *Thief of Flesh*. The story is, at large, a metaphor for substance abuse, but it is presented in a fantasy manner by mirroring the drug aspect with possession by a cannibalistic, mind-altering spirit known in the Ojibwe culture as a Wendigo. Because of the Wendigo spirit's tendency to make those possessed by it gaunt, crazed, angry, and obsessed with sustenance, it mirrors the effects of drugs, specifically opioids in my novel, well.

*Thief of Flesh* follows Elliot, a troubled young boy who is being slowly overtaken by the spirit (and, symbolically, his drug addiction) as a means of attaining some power in his hopeless life which is marked by abuse from his mother's boyfriend and a lack of companionship. His mother, Eleanor, and her boyfriend, Ryan, play the roles of an enabler and someone pushing him for Elliot to stop his bad actions and seek help, respectively. The creative artifact included in this thesis is not yet completed. As you will see from reading it, there are gaps in-between chapters and scenes that need to be finished. After publishing the thesis, further research on the subject and work on the artifact will be done in order to finish *Thief of Flesh*.



## SECTION II

### LITERATURE REVIEW/BACKGROUND/HISTORY/SOURCES

#### Literature Review & Sources

To research for the creation of the creative artifact, close readings were done on scholarly research journals and novels, both fiction and nonfiction. Scholarly journals included research done on substance abuse, how it affects the moods and thoughts of users and those around them, and its effects on relationships. These sources include *The Relationship of Parental Drug Use and Parents' Attitude Concerning Adolescent Drug Use to Adolescent Drug Use* and *The Community Context of Family Structure and Adolescent Drug Use*. Nonfiction novels were read in order to see first-hand accounts of abusers and how it affected their lives and relationships. These sources include *Wake Up, Sir!* By Jonathan Ames and *Beautiful Boy: A Father's Journey Through His Son's Addiction* by David Sheff. Fiction novels were used to study how previous authors framed the reality of drug abuse in their own novels and how they represented the characters and their thoughts and actions, in order to better inform me on how to write the characters in my own novel. These sources include *Dopefiend* by Donald Goines and *Marlena* by Julie Buntin.

#### Background & History

To inform on the fantasy and fiction portions of the creative artifact, research was done on Ojibwe culture, with specific focus on the history of the Wendigo myths within their ancestral stories. This focus on the Wendigo was chosen because of the effect the Wendigo has on people closely mirrors the effects that drug abuse has. The Wendigo, in essence, is a sinister spirit that possesses the weak when they are in times of great trouble. Typically, the story of the Wendigo

follows a human that is lost in the woods and dying of hunger. To keep themselves alive, the human turns to consuming human flesh and is then possessed by the Wendigo spirit. They slowly devolve into the Wendigo monster, which includes their body turning tall and gaunt, horns sprouting from the crown of their head, and a growing feeling of constant hunger and the desire for human flesh that can never be satiated. The Wendigo is a story of greed and never having enough, of slowly turning into a mindless, haunted being, and of the body being broken down. All of these features also mirror that of opioid abuse, which is the focus of this research. For these reasons, the Wendigo spirit was chosen to mirror the drug abuse in the story.

Additional research was done on general cultural and historical facts on the tribe and its people, including their vision quests and everyday life within the modern Leech Lake Tribe which is referenced in the novel. Sources used to research include the anthology entitled *Windigo: Anthology of Fact and Fiction*, as well as various online sources such as the Leech Lake Tribe website and other Ojibwe cultural databases and articles.

### **SECTION III**

#### **EXPLANATION OF EXHIBIT/VENUE**

I presented my research at the URS Symposium presented by LAUNCH on February 26th, 2020 on the Texas A&M College Station campus.

While I was preparing for the presentation, I was nervous about how the symposium would go. However, despite this feeling, I was able to overcome that apprehension by utilizing the resources at my disposal. As a member of the Aggie Creative Collective summer program, I had a team of other writers and my faculty advisor to help me prepare for my presentation. I was able to present my reading to them the week before my official presentation, which gave me an opportunity to practice and receive feedback about what needed to be changed. Further, I also had the LAUNCH organization as a resource for preparation. Before I planned my presentation, I contacted LAUNCH officials to ask how I should structure my research presentation, and they responded in a timely manner with guidelines that I used while planning. This allowed me to feel more assured about both the content and the flow of my speech.

Moreover, at the actual presentation, I was given a chance to hear feedback from both faculty members and my peers. Being asked questions from other students was the most helpful part of the presentation. As this group of individuals is the target audience for my creative artifact, it was a great opportunity to see how they interpreted and enjoyed my piece, which gave me insights into what I should change or focus on for revision. The active listeners, which included faculty and staff members on campus, were less helpful than I expected. The only feedback I got from this group was that my presentation wasn't structured like a traditional research presentation was. They advised me to make it more like a scientific research

presentation and to not include a reading of my artifact at all, which directly conflicted with what LAUNCH had told me to do when I asked them how to structure my presentation. Because of this, I had mixed feelings about the feedback given by the active listeners and am unsure of how to incorporate that into my revisions.

## **SECTION IV**

### **REFLECTION**

#### **Research Process**

During the two semesters of working on my thesis, my research process changed dramatically. This was in part because of the shift in research questions that I wanted my creative artifact to focus on. At first, I had been centering my work around depicting trauma and its psychological impact on actions and emotions, but after multiple sessions with my thesis advisor, I realized that my artifact seemed hollow of motivation. I wanted the characters to display trauma, but I did not give them sufficient reason for that trauma. This made the piece too broad for a reader to connect to or draw any significance from, and because of this, I realized that I didn't have an audience that the work was targeted to at all. To change this, I researched forms of trauma that could explain the actions of my characters and discovered that the effects of the Wendigo spirit mirrored those of drug abuse in many ways. Following this revelation, I looked into drug abuse further to better educate myself on the matter before fully committing to making drug abuse an underlying theme of the creative artifact.

This process helped me to focus my research around an idea that would be more instrumental in educating and connecting to an audience. It also gave me more direction in the sources that I was seeking and reading to supplement my knowledge. Before, I had been struggling to find sources that were specific enough to my research question and what I wanted to convey, partially because my research question was much too broad in scope and because I still wasn't sure what message I wanted to convey in my artifact. Having made the decision to shift my focus to drug abuse and its effects on actions and relationships, my process became

much simpler to implement. I first researched different forms of drugs that might apply to my specific character, and once I settled on opioids, I had a specific category of sources to search for. I spent most of my time researching cases of drug abuse in memoirs and biographies, and read research articles on the effects of drug abuse. This research allowed me to write my characters and scenes based on scientific data and anecdotal evidence, which will allow me to accomplish the goal of informing my artifact's audience on drug abuse and its effects. Hopefully, this knowledge will be useful in helping bring awareness to the issue and reduce drug abuse cases in the future.

### *Audience*

Apart from the shift in my research questions and sources used, I also changed my thinking on my artifact's audience. Until the second semester of working on my novel, I had not considered who the target audience was. I was writing the story within and had the themes and messages that I wanted to convey, but I didn't have a grasp on who I was intending to receive that message. After my first public reading, I realized that this was a massive oversight. The language in my piece was too broad, and my characters were bland and difficult for readers to connect to because they weren't created to appeal to any specific group of people. Because of this, it would be hard for the themes I wanted to express to even be recognized, and this fact degraded the importance of my research. To address this, I set out to discover what my target audience was, which turned out to be 17 to 24 year old young adults who were at a massive turning point in their lives. This realization allowed me to revise the parts of the artifact that I had already written in a way that would hopefully connect with these individuals more.

### *Communication*

After deciding on which audience to target, I was given direction in the ways I should communicate to them. Research shows that the subgroup of young adults ages 17 to 24 do not like being persuasively manipulated. Because of this, I didn't want my artifact to come across as preachy or like I was trying to force an opinion on them. Further, research also shows that this age group prefers entertainment media sources that do not explain everything to them blatantly as it makes them feel as if their intelligence is being questioned. Because of this, I wanted to avoid overexplaining everything in my novel and leaving more of the themes and messages to be hinted at and discovered by close review of the text.

These two qualities led me to shape the type of content in my novel to address these generational preferences. To do this, I wrote more scenes involving actions and dialogue and less expository passages. This allowed for a more natural flow to the novel that focused on the interactions between characters and less on blocks of texts that would explain what was going on. Doing this allows for readers to derive their own meaning from contextual happenings and moves away from simply instructing readers on what the content is supposed to be about or make them think.

### **Public Presentation**

I was given the opportunity to present my research and read an excerpt from my creative artifact at the URS symposium hosted by LAUNCH. Presenting my work allowed me to receive valuable feedback that I can translate into a sharper creative artifact. Specifically, the most enriching part of the experience was the ability to see how my piece was perceived by an audience. After reading my research summary and my novel excerpt, I was asked several questions by the audience that allowed me to see what they thought was the most interesting and what parts needed more clarification. For instance, one audience member asked me about how

the novel at large would show the degradation of relationships between the main character and those close to him. This question allowed me to contrast the various characters and their relationships, which is something that my novel focuses heavily on. This question allowed me to realize that only two relationships, that of Elijah and his mother and of the mother and her boyfriend, were impacted as much as I had originally planned, making me recognize that I needed to make relational effects more obvious. A second question that was asked was how the effects of the Wendigo spirit on the main character mirrored those of his drug abuse. This made me realize that I needed to strengthen the resemblance of them more to make the underlying drug abuse themes more obvious to readers.

As a result of the symposium, these insights have given me the opportunity to look at my creative artifact from a different perspective. I can better understand how my piece and its components are viewed by readers and know what aspects I need to change or strengthen in order for it to communicate the message that I am trying to.



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## **CREATIVE ARTIFACT**

### **THE SPIRIT OF THE FOREST**

#### **ELIJAH**

Through the wavering band of air above the campfire, Elijah could fool himself into believing the drooping trunk of an aspen tree in the distance was the neck of a dinosaur. It was hard to see in the flagging light, but that made it just that more believable. Unlike the ones in the books he had, this dinosaur was white-skinned and had a mop of golden hair, but he liked this version more; it looked more like he did. He was sure that if he pointed it out to one of the other boys in his scout troop that they wouldn't have been able to see the same thing. To them, it'd be a dying tree. But Elijah needed it to be more, or else he'd bore himself to death on this camping trip. There was nothing to do but talk to one another, and for Elijah, between that and squinting enough to make force a blurry tree into a Brachiosaurus, he'd take the latter.

The others in the troop all settled on the talking. The nine other boys in the troop were messing around. The bright flicker of flashlights danced as they shone it in one another's eyes, sticks scraped tic-tac-toe in the dirt, and half-remembered ghost stories cluttered the campground with sound. Across the camp, near where they'd set up the tents, the troop master, Dave Warren, was speaking with the tribe representative named Ben, who'd been the one to take them on a tour around the Leech Lake Indian Reservation earlier in the day. Dave was as unimpressive as ever. He was tall and thin, his hair a curly mop that he never seemed to wash when he was out doing things with the troop. Despite being in his late twenties, he looked like a child compared to Ben White. The Indian man was tall, broad-shouldered, and now thick-bodied with age. His hair was graying, but it was long enough to reach past his shoulder blades when plaited into a braid. The most remarkable part about the man was his voice, which was deep and gravelly and was good

for telling stories, which Ben had told them a lot of. The stories had ended fifteen minutes ago, and now the troop was making their camp for the night, nestled into a clearing near the forest edge so that they'd be near the tribe grounds bright and early for the tribe celebration the next day.

Elijah thought this cultural immersion tribe was way better than their last. The war memorial day in the Spring was just depressing.

This trip was definitely more work, however. Last time had just been following guides around and learning about history. This one was much more involved. They'd been walking or hiking for the better part of the day, had waded across a deep river, and had to find and set up their own campground. Elijah had struggled with his tent when they'd been left to their own devices to set them up. Not because he lacked the knowledge of how to do it. His mom and him would camp out in their backyard or in the woods behind their house every now and again for fun, and the few vacations they did get to steal in between her long stretches of work at the hospital usually involved camping as well. Elijah liked to pretend he didn't know how though. He had the idea that if he acted like he was bad at all the boy scout activities, the troop leader would get fed up at how much he was dragging the group down and kick him out. Or complain so much to Elijah's mother that she felt bad enough to pull him out herself. A year into that strategy, he still hadn't been removed from the troop. But he also hadn't lost any of his motivation to make it happen.

The scouts' responsibilities hadn't ended with setting up their tents. There were other duties that were expected of them.

"Dylan, Elijah, Peter," called Dave. "Go round up some more firewood. Before you go, tell me the group motto."

*“Stick together, survive together,”* they droned in unison. (Elijah only mouthed the words, his arms crossed.) Elijah didn’t want to particularly do *anything* with those two, let alone cohesively.

In all honesty, Elijah didn’t mind the whole scouts gig. He may have thought it fun, if it weren’t for the company. He’d spent seven years of schooling with most of the others, so they knew every little bit about him, mostly whispered down through their moms, if the whispers of Elijah’s own mom’s words to him were anything to believe. His mom wasn’t a good example for some things she’d done in the past, so he was just cut from the wrong cloth. Not the kind of kid to hang out with. Some of them still did talk to him, play with him during school, but he wasn’t one to get invited to the parties.

Elijah, grimacing, stood and followed the others toward the forest edge. Sticks were hard to come by in the clearing, but with Dylan in charge of the flashlight the forest was almost just as useless for finding firewood. He liked to rove it around so you’d accidentally snare your shoe on a root or flash it in your eyes to draw out a yelp. After Peter bumped his funny bone against a tree knot, he smacked Dylan and yanked the flashlight from him. And then it was Elijah and Dylan combing the forest floor for wood. Not that Dylan was much help. He never was. More of a nuisance, really, like the gnats and mosquitos that awakened and swarmed in the warm damp morning of late summer. A few minutes into searching, he’d wandered over to Peter and started whispering to him. Peter flashed his eyes over to Elijah as he was crouched, grinned, and flicked the light off.

Elijah’s head snapped up. In the clearing, the moon had lit up the space enough to see. Inside of the forest, where the trees crowded the sky and blocked out the light, it was impossible to see.

“Guys,” said Elijah, “this isn’t funny.”

He took a step toward where they’d been standing, and then another, and his foot caught on the lip of a root and he stumbled.

The other two boys laughed nearby.

“Guys?” said Elijah again, his voice strained.

Whispering drifted toward him while he stumbled after them, and then the sound of feet crashing through the underbrush joined them. Heading away from him.

“Hey, guys, wait,” said Elijah. “I can’t see. Bring the flashlight back. Guys? Guys!”

The footsteps kept going, the sounds waning as the distance between them waxed. They had a light to lead their feet not to tangle in things, but Elijah had none of that, and every few steps left him tripping over roots and rocks and other small things. After a minute passed, the trees suffocated the sounds of the other boys, and the small beam of light that had jogged in front of them had thinned and disappeared with them.

Elijah slowed to a stop, panting. The bundle of sticks were still curled under his left arm, poking into his ribs.

They would come back, he thought. They would.

Wouldn’t they?

*No* was the answer that came first.

He shifted the bundle of wood and walked in the direction he’d heard them go. His feet kept bumping into roots and logs and other things hidden in the collage of the underbrush, so he walked with caution, feeling with his feet before he placed down his weight. After several times

of knocking the sticks into the invisible trees, he huffed and threw them down. They wouldn't do him any good in his goal; it'd be hard to strangle the other two boys with one arm occupied.

He crashed through the forest, huffing more every time he smashed into a tree and got turned back around. Fifteen minutes later, his scout uniform clung to him, damp and muggy, like a wetsuit. He could feel the crisscross of scratch marks crawling up his exposed legs stinging as the sweat and dirt festered. He'd gotten nowhere, from what he could see, which was nothing. The forest was as dark and thick as it had been when he'd begun trying to find his way out. For all he knew, he could be in the same place. Or farther in. If he'd been closer to the forest edge, the thick of the forest would have thinned and let the light dip its fingers into the gaps in the trees and light the way.

He should have kept going. Not because there was any greater chance of him finding his way out. If anything, he was more likely to wander farther inside. But because once he stopped and was no longer filling his time with walking, his thoughts began to run, breeding panic.

*Have the others even noticed I'm gone?* He wondered. Dave had been preoccupied talking to Ben when the boys had left to gather wood. He could have still been when the other two had returned and not have paid enough attention to realize there wasn't a third among them. Elijah usually kept to himself, kept quiet. There was little chance anyone would think about him being gone. They might not notice he was gone until the morning when Dave counted them before they headed out. *I'll be alone here all night. I'll have to fend for myself until morning. Even then, how long would it take them to track him down once they realized?* It was cold already, and with the sun gone, it would only worsen. With his arms and legs bare and his warmer night clothes in his backpack, the growing cold would become too bad.

He was just beginning to panic when he saw the swell of orange through the trees. Light. With it came relief.

He tramped through the woods after it. The comfort of the sight was so large that he didn't process the fact that there was no sound coming from the camp.

Breaking into the clearing, his shoulders settled down with a relieved sigh. Then bunched back up.

At the center of the clearing was a small fire, a spit with meat roasting balanced over it. Beside it, sat cross-legged, was a boy. He was about Elijah's age--11 or so--but Elijah didn't recognize him. His skin was warm and russet, the color of Ben's from the reservation. This was an indian boy, not one of the troop members.

He looked up at Elijah. He didn't look surprised to see him.

"Hello," said the boy, "you're just in time for dinner. Are you hungry?"

Gabriel hadn't been hungry before, but now that his thoughts were directed to his stomach, it growled.

He frowned. "I thought this was my troop's camp. I didn't mean to come here."

"You're a part of the boy scout troop visiting the tribe, aren't you?" asked the boy.

"Yeah."

"What are you doing all the way out here? You guys are camping by the forest edge, aren't you?"

"We are. I went out to get wood and lost my flashlight, got all turned around...Where are we? Is it close to the camp? I really need to get back."

"That's not a good idea at this time. It's too dark out and the temperature is dropping. You'd be better off just waiting out the night. I have a tent. It's big enough for us to share."

Gabriel hadn't noticed it before, but off to the left there was a tent big enough to fit several people inside. "You look tired. Come on, sit by the fire. It's warm and we can eat."

"The others will be worried when they notice I'm gone. They'll come looking for me."

"And they'll find you with your neck broken having tripped over some root in the dark. Trust me. I've lived in these woods all my life. I know what I'm talking about. I'll take you back to your camp in the morning, but tonight you should stay here."

Elijah usually would have kept protesting, but he couldn't find the energy. Instead, he sank down across the fire from the Ojibwe boy.

"I'm Elijah, by the way. What's your name? Also, what are you doing out here by yourself?"

"They kicked me out of the tribe for a while," said the boy.

"They kicked you out?"

The boy laughed. "They kick most tribal members out for a little bit when they reach puberty. It's for the vision quests."

"A vision quest? What's that?"

"Usually when you're transitioning into adulthood in the tribe, you're sent out into the wilderness by yourself without shelter and food and our meant to have a spiritual awakening."

"You've got a tent and food though."

"Yeah, I hid the tent and hunting traps a month ago when I heard they were planning on sending me out here."

Elijah huffed out a laugh. "That sounds like cheating."



The boy grinned, his lips pulling up over his teeth. His canines were sharper than a normal person, Elijah noted. “I’m not all too invested in the tribe’s rules and traditions. A lot of them are outdated. The beliefs and stories, they’re kind of twisted, ya know?”

“Like what?” Ben had told them some of the tribal legends and myths, and most of them had been foreign to him. He didn’t believe a single one of them, but if this boy agreed, he was interested to know why.

“They believe all the stories they’ve learned are fact, for one,” said the Ojibwe boy. Elijah didn’t know his name, but for some reason, he didn’t feel compelled to ask. He just wanted to listen. “And that the original storytellers were reliable to tell them. But it’s not so cut and dry, I think. They have all these ideas about what’s good and bad, and the main characters are always right, but that’s not how things actually work. It makes me wonder what’s actually true about them all.

“I got a few ideas. Like, there’s this one about a supposedly dark forest spirit that eats...well, I probably shouldn’t go into that one right now. It’s kinda scary and it’s dark out, wouldn’t want to give you nightmares.”

Elijah sat up straighter, chest jutting out. “Things like that don’t scare me. I can handle it.”

The boy grinned, canines flashing again. “A brave one. I knew you were a good choice.

“Anyway, the story. It’s a really old one. There’s a lot of different versions, but a lot of them say the same thing, that there’s this dark spirit that lives in the woods and preys on humans. They usually come out in winter, mostly because of what they truly are.”

When the boy paused, Elijah asked, “What’s that?”

“Humans. Starving ones. They say some tribal members will get all turned around in the

woods, get stuck there. Winter storms too bad to try and find their way back, no way to get help, no food to eat. After awhile they get desperate, ravenous, and then one of them will do the unspeakable: kill the others and eat them to survive. And that's how the Wendigo is created. A dark spirit overtakes them once they've eaten the flesh of man and they start turning into a monster, sprouting horns and growing inhumanly tall, becoming more and more gaunt as their hunger for human flesh grows with each time it feeds..."

A shiver ripped through Elijah. The other boy's voice had dropped low as he told the story, and it made Elijah want to curl in on himself, the cold around him suddenly apparent, the white of the trees staring at him from all sides turning into pointed teeth grinning from a dark maw.

Then, the spell was broken. The Ojibwe boy's voice brightened as he said, "Oh, the meat's definitely done," and scrambled to remove the splits from the fire. Elijah's eyes moved toward the crackling meat and his stomach rumbled. He licked his lips.

The Ojibwe reached down to grab plates, of which he had exactly two. Carefully, he removed the meat from the split and divided it onto two plates.

"You wanted some, right?" he asked, looking up at Elijah.

Elijah, hurriedly, nodded. The other boy smiled back.

"What animal is that from?" asked Elijah.

The flesh was white and looked smooth and tough like pork.

"A wild boar. There are too many of them in this forest, so it's good to hunt them. They're always rutting up the land and being nuisances anyway."

He handed one of the plates to Elijah. "Eat up. You'll need the energy for the hike back to your troop in the morning."

Elijah nodded. His eyes stayed focused on the meat, and something in his mind niggled, a faint voice whispering in the background. It was too low to hear with the crackle of the fire and the voice of the Ojibwe's voice as he continued talking. He picked up a chunk of meat and took a bite.

## THE MISSING BOY

### ELIJAH

“Thank God,” was the first thing Elijah heard when he broke the tree line into the troop’s clearing.

All the heads of the boy scouts turned to him. They looked surprised and relieved all at once. Except for Dylan. He was sat on a log across the way, his arms wrapped around his body and his eyes staring wide and red at the ground.

Master Dave strode toward Elijah, continuing to speak. “Where the hell have you been, Elijah? We’ve been worried sick all night looking for you.” The man looked even more frazzled than usual. His hair was an angry tangle of brown, stuck to his red forehead with sweat. He hadn’t changed out of his sleeping clothes either, and his knees looked incredibly knobby under the hem of his pineapple-decorated shorts.

Elijah frowned, annoyed by the stern look and the harsh tone of Dave. As if *he* were the one that had done something wrong. Dylan and Peter should have been the ones in trouble. From the looks of it, Dylan had already gotten scolded, and presumably Peter was tucked away in one of the tents, brooding on his own. But why, if they’d come back without Elijah having left him stranded, should Elijah been the one who got in trouble?

(Also, Elijah felt like a man-child in pineapple shorts shouldn’t have had the authority to chastise him in the first place.)

He crossed his arms. “I got lost in the woods because Peter and Dylan thought it’d be funny to leave me alone without a flashlight and run off. I couldn’t find my way back. Why are you mad at me? It wasn’t my fault.”

Dave sighed and ran a hand down his face. “Yeah, yeah, I know. You’re not in trouble. It’s just...we’re all worried and high-strung right now because of you and Peter.”

“Peter?” asked Elijah.

“Did you come across him since they left you last night?”

“In the woods? No.”

Dave cursed. He turned to look over his shoulder. Ben White stood across the clearing, two other older tribal men with him. The older man must have hurried over to the campsite, roused from sleep. His braid was undone and his long silver hair hung down his back freely, frizzy and tousled. Whereas the man had seemed calm the day before, he seemed restless now. His eyes kept scanning the tree line of the forest, suspicious. He, along with the other tribal men, didn’t look very happy. Their mouths all folded into thin lines as they talked. Elijah could understand that; it wouldn’t have been good to have a visiting kid lost on your land.

“Why?” continued Elijah. “What happened?”

“He’s missing,” said Dave. “We were hoping you’d both show up back together.”

“Weren’t him and Dylan together?”

“For a time, yeah. But Dylan came back late last night, all in a panic. Said they’d come across some big animal in the woods and it’d spooked them. He ran, and when he finally stopped, Peter wasn’t anywhere to be found.

“You’re sure you didn’t see any sign of him on your way back? Tracks or anything? Human or from whatever that big animal was? Dylan said it had antlers, so there would have been hoof marks.”

“It was still pretty dark most of the way here.” He tried to remember anything special. The Ojibwe boy had been drawing his attention most of the time with his talking and Elijah

hadn't spent all that much time focusing on the ground. The only times he'd thought to look down were when they were going through bushes or crossing rivers... "Wait, I think I remember some tracks by the second to last stream I crossed. But they were human and definitely too big to be Peter's. Biggest feet I've ever seen."

Dave nodded. His eyes closed, and it was obvious how tired he was. His eyes looked sunk in, dark semi-circles carved underneath them, his jaw red from where he'd rubbed it too much. "Thanks, Elijah. I'm glad you're back safe. Did you get hurt at all?"

"No."

"Good." He put his hand on Elijah's back and led him toward the camp. "You should get something to drink and eat. I wish you could rest, but it looks like we're going to pack up and head out of here."

Elijah stopped and turned around. "We're leaving? Without Peter?"

"We can't stay for liability reasons. I'm supposed to do everything to keep you guys safe. If Peter really did get attacked by some beast, I have to prevent it from happening from the rest of you. The tribe contacted the local authorities and both the tribe members and the police will be sending out search parties to find Peter. They're much more equipped to find him than we are. We'd only be getting in the way. Now, I have to go talk to the tribal leaders to arrange our departure. Try and eat and drink."

Dave strode away, leaving Elijah to brood alone. He glanced around. Several of the other boys were packing up their tents, but they kept glancing up at him and whispering to one another. Most of them were clustered around Dylan, keeping him company and telling stupid jokes to try and get him to go back to his normal self. Despite them looking up at Elijah as he walked around the camp, none of them came over to him.

He frowned and dropped his gaze. He made his way to his own tent site. He had Garrett had been sharing one, and the other boy had already broken it down and rolled it. Garrett was also no longer there, but across the camp with some of the others. He'd put Elijah's bag and other belongings off in front of the tent site, leaned against one of the logs that bordered the campfire circle. Elijah slumped onto the log. Digging through his things, he found his rations and tore into a strip of beef jerky.

After the first bite, he grimaced. It tasted off. But when he looked down at the package, there on the front of it was stamped: Pepper Kick Jerky. It was the same jerky brand and flavor his mom would always buy from the local meat shop. She'd gotten this pack just before Elijah had gone on the scout trip so that he'd have snacks. It should have been fresh. When he flipped it over, the expiration date proved that, the date several months away. Why did it taste so strange then? It was softer than usual, he was sure, and milder too, lacking flavor and almost stale.

He didn't care enough to waste the food, so he tore another bite off and kept chewing. Maybe it was just his soured mood, but the jerky didn't taste nearly as good as usual. He thought about the boar meat that the Ojibwe boy had cooked, and his stomach gave a growl. He was definitely hungry, but only if he'd had something to eat as good as the boar...It had been so supple and flavorful, the scent of it thick and heady. It was much more tender than the meat his mom ever cooked, and he wondered how the Ojibwe boy could have made something that good with only a spit and a fire. Maybe his mom just sucked at cooking and that was how all meat was meant to taste.

Continuing to eat, he thought about everything Dave had told him. Had something actually happened to Peter? As angry at the boy as Elijah had been the previous night when he and Dylan abandoned him in the woods, he didn't want the boy to die. He was one of the better

ones in the troop. Elijah was sure they would have been friends if he didn't tend to hang out with the annoying ones like Dylan and Willis. He liked most of the same things as Elijah—camping and dinosaurs and Indian Jones. They'd both even showed up to school on Halloween day dressed as the rugged archaeologist.

“Elijah, isn't it?” asked a voice beside him. Ben's tone and candor were easy to identify even after only a day around him. He had a deep voice with a touch of gravel, his tone steady and calm.

“Yeah,” said Elijah, swallowing the rest of his mouthful. His eyebrows folded inward. What did the man want from him?

Ben lowered himself onto the log beside Elijah. He threaded his fingers together. “I overheard you tell Dave that you'd seen inhumanly large footprints near the forest.”

“They were definitely human, not something else. They were just big, that's it. I s'pose someone could have feet that size, a basketball player or something, I just haven't met anyone with that big of feet before.”

“Mmm,” said Ben. “And with these tracks, did you notice anything else?”

Elijah frowned. “Like what?”

“Frost on the ground, broken branches, blood.”

“Blood? What--no. You don't think they had something to do with Peter, do you? That he was taken by some big-footed man in the woods?”

“Ah, no, not exactly. I was just making sure. There are never too many questions that can be asked at a time like this.” His eyes met Elijah's, brown and steady and serious. “There's also no telling what can be out in the woods. It's a dangerous place.”

Elijah's mouth pressed together. Was Ben really implying that...?



“You know what,” said Elijah, snapping. “Those footprints, I think you’re right. There was something off about them. They were way too big to be human, and it was in the woods. You don’t think it could have been...” He lowered his voice. “Big Foot, do you?”

To Ben’s credit, he didn’t look angry or disapproving that Elijah was obviously messing with him. Instead, he said, in a very serious tone: “How did you find your way back to the camp?”

The boring drill of Ben’s eyes made Elijah’s jaw slow chew more slowly around her food. There was something knowing in the man’s eyes, and at first the boy couldn’t place what it was.

“I walked,” said Elijah, voice peaking in confusion.

“Alone?”

The boy bristled. “You think I had something to do with Peter?”

“No, I don’t. I’m just trying to make sure no one else was out there in danger if there is something to worry about out there.”

And then Elijah remembered the Ojibwe boy. Out in the woods alone with no protection but a knife and some makeshift weapons and supplies he’d smuggled out a few months back.

Ben must have seen the realization in his eyes. “Have you remembered something?”

Elijah hesitated. Should he say something about the Ojibwe boy? Sure, he was alone in the forest to fare on his own. If there was something out there to endanger him, he’d have a hard time fighting it off on his own. But the tribe was aware he was on his vision journey. If there was a known threat, they’d send someone out to bring him home. He was likely already safe, or on his way to being there. And Elijah revealing that he’d spoken to him would only get the other boy in trouble for not truly isolating himself like he was supposed to during his journey.

“No, it was nothing,” said Elijah. “I was just thinking about how lucky I was to not run across anything on my way back.”

## WATCHER IN THE DARK

### NELL

Night vision would have been Nell's superpower of choice. It didn't have much utility in a normal life, but it had been at least a month since her life could be considered anywhere near normal. Stumbling around in the dark, after all, had seemed like a rational solution to her when she found her son's bed empty.

"Elijah?" she called. She was standing on the back deck, the cold wooden planks underfoot bleeding chills into her legs. A thick cardigan was wrapped around her body, her arms curled about her waste.

There was no answer. Elijah was either hiding or gone from the yard completely. She'd already checked every nook in the house that an eleven year old boy could fit, and it had been the sound of the back sliding door shutting that had woken her up anyway. He'd gone outside. But there was so much outside to check.

Why had he gone outside at three in the morning? He'd done so many strange things lately, that she couldn't understand his reasoning for any of it. More and more, he was changing. And not for the better.

Nell ventured further onto the deck and squinted in the dark. "Eiljah." She raised her voice as loud as she dared to, hoping she wouldn't wake the neighbors. But there was no response, just the distant sound of an owl hooting.

Cursing, she went back inside to slip on some shoes and grab a flashlight before venturing out again. She'd need to have her feet covered if she was going to go tromping around in the woods now. The snow of the season hadn't begun to fall yet. That was still a week or two

out. But the ground was cold, and all the branches were dead and many had shed sharp sticks that could jab into her feet if she went tromping around the yard and forest unprotected.

She took five laps around the house. On the third, she crouched underneath the two decks on the front and back of the house, shining the flashlight beam into every nook and calling Elijah's name. Still, no answer came.

Jaw tense, she turned to the tree line in the backyard. Could he have ventured past the yard? Elijah was used to wandering twenty or so feet into the wood whenever he would go on one of his archaeology digs, but he knew Nell didn't want him to go in any further without supervision. This new Elijah wasn't very good with rules or being told what to do, however. The forest seemed like a reasonable place for him to have disappeared.

She shined the light along the forest edge. She was looking for a sign he'd been there: footprints, snapped sticks, smushed leaves. It was hard to tell what was natural from what wasn't, though. There were multiple places where the ground looked treaded on, but there were often raccoons or deer that wandered into the backyard and there was no telling what was from an animal or what was from Elijah.

Nell couldn't just wait to see if her son would ever wander back on his own, though. She had to try and find him. At the next crumbled grouping of fallen leaves she found, she stepped over and into the forest. It was even colder inside of the forest where the light could barely touch. It was dark too, and without her flashlight, Nell wouldn't have been able to see at all. Even with the beam to guide her, she wasn't sure where she was supposed to go. All of the ground inside the forest looked like something had been across it at one time or another in the past week. Without any clear direction, Nell walked straight, hoping that Elijah had taken that way too.

Every few feet, she called his name. Every sound that jumped back at her made her jerk. Some of them were the sounds of small animals crashing through the underbrush away from her, startled that something as big as a human was creeping around the forest at night. Others were the sound of wings aflutter above. Others, still, she couldn't place. The creaking of something, the shuffle just above her head, the babble of something that may have been water to her right. None of them were those of a child lost and scared in the forest though.

Panicking, she began to call Elijah's name louder.

"Elijah, Elijah—"

A new sound cut off her cries. She jerked all the way around, terrified of what it could be. But it wasn't coming from the forest; it was coming from her.

In her pocket, her phone was ringing.

Hand over her heart to still its racing pace, she answered the phone. The screen read a number she didn't know.

"Hello?" Nell asked.

"Is this Elijah Price's mother?" asked a voice. It belonged to an older woman, possibly in her forties.

"Ah, yes, this is she. What is this about? It's very late, you know." She tried sounding calm, but she was anything but. It couldn't have been a coincidence that this woman was calling her on the same night at the same time that Elijah was missing.

The other woman sighed. "I'm Dylan Howard's mother, Melissa. I think we met at the school play last year."

"Yes, yes, that's right." Nell didn't remember the other woman at all.

"Is your son home?"

“Excuse me?” Nell’s shoulders tensed. “Why wouldn’t he be? It’s almost four in the morning. Do you think I keep my child out all night?”

“No, of course not. It’s just...well, this is going to sound very silly. I know you may understand though, given that you’re also a mother. And those kids, sometimes they just convince themselves of things and what not. It’s just...Dylan thought he saw Elijah just now.”

Nell swallowed. “Saw him where?”

“Outside of his window. He said Elijah was lifting himself over the window pane, staring right in on him while he was sleeping. Dylan woke up when he heard some banding noise and he says it was your son, knocking on his window to try and get him to wake up and get scared. It sounds rather outrageous to me, especially since Dylan’s room is on the second story. I’m not sure how a young boy could have even gotten up there.” The woman laughed awkwardly, but in a tight way. “I still wanted to check though...I found some footprints out in the yard and they got me kind of spooked. And Dylan is still a mess about it all. I was just wandering if...well, maybe if you could go check to make sure your son is in his bed?”

Nell couldn’t respond. Her throat felt like cotton, soaking up all her saliva and stealing her speech. What the hell was Elijah doing across town staring into some boy’s window? Dylan, if she recalled, was one of the boys who picked on him and abandoned him in the woods for the night. That was the same night that he’d come back from different...

“Hello?” asked Melissa.

Nell was jerked out of her daze by the woman’s voice. “Sorry, I was just walking to Elijah’s room to check. I put the phone down for a moment. He’s here though, tucked away in his bed.” She hesitated, wondering what she should say next. “I’m sorry your son had such a horrible nightmare, especially about my boy. I wouldn’t know why.”

“Ah, well.” Melissa sounded awkward again. “To tell you the truth, Dylan has been telling me the last few weeks that he’s scared of Elijah. Apparently, he was being somewhat strange before he left school and was intimidating Dylan.”

Nell’s jaw tensed. Her response was immediate and sharp. “Well, maybe Elijah felt the need to protect himself a little after your son abandoned him in the woods overnight on their scouts trip.”

The line crackled as no one spoke. Then, several moments later, Melissa asked, “What?”

“Oh, you didn’t know? Well, to tell you the truth, Dylan left my son in the woods overnight without a flashlight or any supplies because him and Peter thought it was funny. And then, when him and Peter ran into whatever animal killed the other boy, instead of helping Peter he just ran away and abandoned him too. So, maybe, this nightmare he’s having about my son isn’t because he’s afraid of my son, but because he’s guilty about what he did. Maybe, just maybe, it’s that.”

"I...I had no idea."

“Yeah, well I suppose he only tells you things when it’s convenient for him.” Nell took a deep breath to try and calm herself. “It’s late. I’m going to bed. Please don’t call me again about your son’s fantasies.”

She hung about. Immediately, her ire was replaced by a single thought:

Shit, I should have asked where she lived. How would she find where Elijah was now?

## SELF-TREATMENT

### NELL

Nell's decency evaporated in the span of a second. One moment she was standing behind the pharmacy counter taking Mr. Franklin's new prescription, and the next she came to the epiphany that it would be entirely too easy to murder him.

"The shaking has gotten a little worse in the past few months," Mr. Franklin was saying. "My doctor said that can be normal when you get to be my age."

Nell nodded, but she was only half listening. Her eyes were following the old man's hands as they took the sealed medication bag from the counter. The pills inside rattled against the plastic of their container as his arms shook. How simple it would be to overtake someone as weak as him...

But it wouldn't have been that easy, would it? She couldn't even manage to steal a dead body. After her failed attempts at the hospital last week, under the true purpose of being there to lecture on proper pharmaceutical prescribing, she hadn't been able to sneak out a body like she'd planned to. Even after sneaking down to the morgue and reading the work schedule, finding the rare ten minutes where all of the workers were on lunch break, she hadn't been able to bring herself to actually smuggle out one of the bodies. Some combination of guilt and repulsion and the straight fear of being caught had eaten at her to the point where she'd had to leave empty-handed. She wished she'd have just been able to push down the emotions. Just a few moments of bravery, and she'd have exactly what she needed to stave off the worst of her problems for at least a few days. Her mind kept getting tangled in memories from them: Elijah, the fork bending in his hand as he protested the pasta, demanding meat; Elijah, throwing the plate of steak to the ground, claiming it wasn't raw enough; Elijah, his shirts creeping further up his abdomen each



day as his bones stretched and grew; Elijah, his teeth biting into her hand as she tried to check his temperature; Elijah, standing in the backyard, a dead bird at his feet.

“Eleanor?” asked Mr. Franklin.

Her head jerked up. “Yes? I’m sorry, I just zoned out a little there...”

His thick gray eyebrows pressed together. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah. It’s been a long day, is all.”

“You shouldn’t work yourself so hard,” he said. “You’ll realize work isn’t all that important compared to most other things when you’re older.”

“Well, I can’t wait to be old then. For the time being, I’m not sure I really have a choice but to work. Keeps the kid fed, you know?” She winced at her own words. Maybe in the past they’d been true, but if they still were she wouldn’t be having nearly as many troubles as she was, random thoughts of killing nice acquaintances being one of them.

“Ah, yes, I do know, all too well. Mine all have kids of their own to wrangle now, but I remember the days of doing anything just to keep them alive and happy. But I’m sure you know how that is. How old’s your boy again?”

“Thirteen.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, there’s no telling the kind of stuff you put up with these days then. It’s a tough age. So much change.”

She swallowed. “You could say that again.” She furrowed her brow as she watched her own hands mindlessly fiddle with the peeling countertop. “Sometimes...sometimes I wonder just how far I would go for him.”

“Probably as far as possible. I know I’d do anything for my kids.”

“Anything?” she asked, her fingers stilling on the counter. She bit her lip. “And you’d think it’d be justifiable, because you love your kids so much, right?”

“Yeah, of course. Don’t you?”

Slowly, she nodded. “Yeah, yeah I do.”

Maybe, she thought, it wouldn’t have been too hard to bring herself to do something bad. Was it really bad if it was done with good intentions?

It would be easy, in reality, to fool Mr. Franklin. She’d just tell him she wanted to double check his prescription to make sure she got the right one. Oh, she’d say, she forgot her glasses and couldn’t read the little words on the bottle. Could he come back behind the counter to read the two she had? He’d come, of course he would, an amicable person like Mr. Franklin. And then all it would take would be a sharp hit to his head, or neck, against the counter. She could drag him to the storage room until she closed the shop in an hour.

She reached across the counter. “Can I see your prescription again? I want to check I gave you the right one. I’m just now remembering that I found out after sealing yours that I’d accidentally shelved some medicines incorrectly.”

He blinked and shakily set the bag back on the counter. “Oh, sure.”

She took it and pulled it open to fish out the bottle. Turning the label to face her, she faked scanning it for a second. She parted her mouth in surprise and opened her mouth to say the lie.

The back exit screeched open. Miller came through it wheeling a dolly stacked with boxes. His eyes moved up and found them, and he nodded at Mr. Franklin.

“How’s it going, Barry?” asked Miller.

“Just swell, Dustin, how about you?” replied Mr. Franklin.

“Ready to get off soon.”

Mr. Franklin chuckled. “I can understand that.” His eyes found Nell again. “Is everything fine?”

“What? Why wouldn’t it be?” she asked.

“The medicine, you said it might have been incorrect.”

“Oh,” said Nell, her shoulders loosening. “No. I mean yes, everything is correct.” She resealed the bag and slid it back over to him. “Sorry about the inconvenience.” Stepping back from the counter, she clenched her hands behind her back. “I need to go help Miller put away the new medicine. Have a nice night, Mr. Franklin.”

“You too, Eleanor.”

Hurrying around the corner, when Nell was finally out of sight from the customer desk she clenched her eyes shut and cursed herself.

What an idiot, she thought. She was acting recklessly. She could have been caught so easily. It wasn’t like they’d been in a private place where no one could have seen. She was acting like she was in the privacy of her own home with no prying eyes, where she could so easily do anything and be able to cover it up without anyone realizing it.

She paused. The cogs in her mind slowly started churning through the idea. Earlier, she’d thought her idea of hitting him and dragging him into the back room until closing had been such a simple idea. But in reality, there was one much simpler...

~\*~

Nell pulled open the front door, and she couldn’t help keep the smile from stretching onto her face. It was the first genuine one she’d had in over a month.

“Mr. Franklin,” she greeted, stepping aside. “Thank you so much for coming.”

“It’s no problem. Always happy for things to get me out of the house these days.

Retirement can get a little boring.” He walked inside.

“I apologize again for this...” said Nell, frowning. “I shouldn’t have gotten your phone number from the pharmacy records. It’s a huge violation of your privacy and a violation of HIPAA regulations. I wasn’t sure what I was thinking.”

He gave her a comforting smile. “You were thinking about your son, is what it was.”

“I know, but it was a stupid thing to do regardless of--”

He held up a hand to silence her, and her voice waned to nothing.

“Let’s not worry about it anymore, alright? We’ve got some serious stuff to attend to.”

Nell let out a large breath and nodded. Dropping her protests, she directed him to the sofa and she sat across from him in the armchair.

“So,” said Mr. Franklin, “on the phone you mentioned that Elijah’s been feeling down lately.”

Nell straightened. “Yes. He’s always felt a little left out when it comes to others his age, but it’s gotten even worse since a bad event that happened during one of his Boy Scout retreats.”

He nodded, mouth pulling down at the information. “And you think I could somehow help him feel better?”

“Well, I’m not exactly sure. I just thought...maybe you could talk to him and somewhat be a role model. He doesn’t really have a male figure in his life, or anyone who relates to him on his interests. And, like I said on the phone, he’s always been really interested in archaeology and dinosaurs and things, and I remember you said you used to be a field paleontologist before you became a professor. I thought maybe you could talk to him about your work, show him

something cool. I think it may make him feel a little better, or at least like he has someone that's like him. The other kids sometimes make fun of him for the things he's into, so if he saw someone who excelled in that area and is successful, I think it could help him."

Mr. Franklin nodded and leaned forward onto his elbows.

"The other day," he said, "while we were in the pharmacy, you said you were sometimes worried you didn't do enough for him. I'll let you know right now that you're absolutely wrong. You'd risk your job just for the potential to have someone make your son feel a little more comfortable in his skin for the things he likes, and that makes you ten times the mom than most kids have."

Nell's mouth went slack and her shoulders fell. She sat dazzled for a moment at the compliment, but soon followed the sinking cold of remorse in her stomach. Mr. Franklin, out of everyone she had met, was one of the least deserving of being tricked and used. Could she really be so cold as to treat him like that?

"I..." she said, struggling for words. "Thank you. But I don't think-"

A door opened across the house, followed by the patter of small feet sinking into carpet.

"Mom?" a boyish voice said. "I'm hungry."

Mr. Franklin and her rose at the exact same time. Elijah came around the corner from the hallway a moment after and paused when he saw the foreign man. Hesitantly, he remained where he was.

"Elijah," said Nell. "This is Mr. Franklin. I know him from work."

Mr. Franklin took a step toward Elijah. "Hey there, buddy. I've heard a lot of great things about you from your mom."

Elijah stared at him for a moment before turning to his mom. “I’m hungry, Momma,” he said. “Can I have some meat?”

Nell’s eyes widened and bounced to Mr. Franklin. She strode over to Elijah and placed her hands on his shoulders to look into his eyes. “Of course, baby, I’ll make some for you soon. How about you go off and play while I make it?”

Elijah’s eyebrows furrowed. “Why can’t I have it now? I’m hungry.”

“It takes time to prepare, sweetie.”

“Why? I told you I don’t want it cooked anymore. It’s not bloody enough when you cook it.”

Mr. Franklin’s expression pulled tight in confusion. Nell barreled forward before the situation could get any worse.

“Elijah, stop speaking nonsense,” she said, laughing. “I’ll make you food and give it to you in a little bit. Go and play for now.”

“But--”

The niceties in her tone evaporated, and she said the rest through gritted teeth. “Elijah, your room, now. We have a guest. Don’t be rude.”

A growl rumbled from the small boy, and he turned on his heel and stomped down the hallway. Moments later, a door slammed across the house hard enough for the walls to shake.

Back in the living room, the air was thick and still. Nell swiveled back toward her guest and pasted on a fake smile, her laugh just as strained.

“Kids,” she said. “They say the strangest things.”

Mr. Franklin’s frown didn’t budge. His eyes glanced toward the hallway where Elijah had stormed away.

“Eleanor...” he said eventually, turning back to her with a pinched expression. “Are you sure everything’s alright with that boy? I know you said he was acting a little off, but he seems...” ...” Mr. Franklin didn’t have to say what was wrong with Elijah. It was obvious something was off about him.

He was almost indistinguishable from the boy he’d once been. His limbs were long, overstretched from how they’d grown over the past month, and stick thin too from his insatiable appetite that wasn’t fed enough. His eyes were different, half-lidded but sharp and focused on every little movement. And his voice: he didn’t sound like a young kid anymore half of the time. His voice was deeper, more labored, like he was a man who was struggling to talk after running a half marathon. Not to mention, there was the feeling that permeated any room he walked into. Anyone else near him just felt...uncomfortable.

Nell’s mouth pressed together. “What do you mean? He’s perfectly alright. His sense of humor is just difficult to grasp when you first meet him. An odd one, I told you.”

“I’ve seen odd before, but that kid...” He reached a hand out to lay on her shoulder. “Eleanor, I know you might not want to hear this because you’re his mother and I can tell you love him a lot, but I think there maybe something deeper than him just not fitting in. Have you thought about taking him to see a doctor?”

“Why? Does he look sick to you?”

“Physically, no, maybe a little thin if anything, but that’s not the concern. The things he said, the way he got angry so quickly...He could have something affecting him...mentally.”

Nell’s shoulders tightened. “Are you saying you think there’s something wrong with my child?”

He winced. "I'm saying that it wouldn't hurt to make sure. He looks different from the pictures you've shown me, almost...deteriorated. I know it's hard to say about your own kid, but as a pharmacist who's learned about mental conditions and how they affect people, you should know how serious it could be if you didn't get him treated if it was true."

Her jaw set. "There's nothing to be treated."

The gaul, she thought. This man had never met Elijah, knew nothing about him, not nearly as much as Nell herself knew about her son. He had no idea what he was talking about, regardless of how helpful he imagined himself to be. But Nell knew the truth. About Elijah and about Mr. Franklin. The old man *was* useful, but not in the way he thought. And the reservations she felt before, about feeling horrible about what she planned to do, evaporated.

"Eleanor, I'm sorry to have upset you."

Her hands shook, and she clenched them to stop them from reaching out. "No, you've actually made something much easier for me."

Mr. Franklin blinked. "I have?" His worried expression cleared to relief. "I'm glad you're starting to see reason, Eleanor. Realizing this could help your son very much."

Smile saccharine, she said, "Thank you. I'm glad we could come to the same conclusion. I hate to ask this, but would you mind helping me in the kitchen for a second? I can't quite reach the plate I need to make Elijah lunch without getting out the step stool in the pantry."

"Of course." He followed her into the kitchen. "Which cabinet is it in?"

"The one on the far left," she answered. While he went to go open it, she bent and opened the cabinet that held the cookware. From it, she drew the cast iron skillet. Straightening herself, she tested the weight of it in her hand.



Across the kitchen, Mr. Franklin was peering inside the cabinet. He turned to her with a frown. "There's only glasses in here."

"Oh, silly me," she said. "I meant the cabinet just next to it. I'm sorry."

"No trouble," he said, moving to open the next one.

"You're being such a great help," said Nell as she crossed the kitchen. "This will make such a great meal for Elijah."

Mr. Franklin had to stretch on his toes to reach the plates on the top shelf. Drawing up behind him as he rose, Nell drew the skillet above her head and brought it down with force.

The man buckled to the ground. Color bloomed on the crown of his head, and she saw the wide whites of his eyes before the second and third and fourth and fifth crash of the skillet closed them forever.

Chest heaving, Nell let the skillet drop to the ground. When her breath had evened enough to speak, she raised her voice so that it would carry all the way across the house.

"Elijah, your dinner is ready."

## THE MONSTER UNDER THE HOUSE

### NELL

Nell's feet grew more confident with each dark descent she made down the basement stairs. The genius who had designed the house a century back had placed the light cord at the foot of the staircase, and so each step down the creaky wooden planks was taken in darkness. A week prior, Nell would have brought a flashlight with her to illuminate the journey, but she had traversed the steps so often in the past two weeks that her muscles knew the steps by memory. Not having to take the flashlight was a positive. It left her both hands to keep the heavy plate she was carrying steady.

The creak of the steps was loud in the concrete shell of the basement, but it wasn't alone. As always, once the groaning wood marked her arrival, the dark sounds of the room's inhabitant would answer back. A rattle of chains pulled taut; the brush of feet on concrete; a rumbling of breath inside a chest; the sniffing of a nose seeking out her scent and connecting to a memory; a soft voice asking, "Mom?"

Nell made it to the end of the stairs and found her way to the dangling chain in the dark. She pulled it. Light swelled into the room, and the harsh fluorescents made her squint her eyes until they adjusted.

Across from her, in the corner, Elijah blinked back owlshly at her as his eyes similarly adjusted. It didn't take as long for him, despite how long he'd spent in the deep hollow of darkness. His eyes weren't the same soft green of sage they'd been before. They'd expanded to black, doeish and blank.

"Mom."

Nell swallowed. "Hi, Baby."

It was hard for Nell to voice the pet name. This thing before her didn't look like her baby. Few things of Elijah remained. There was the greasy tangle of his thin brown hair, now overgrown to where it curled around his monkey ears and the budding stumps of antlers that now pushed out from his temples three inches or so. There also remained the restless fiddle of his hands as they palmed the metal cuffs encircling his wrists. Apart from that, he was alien to her. In a month, he had morphed completely into something inhuman. His chubby cheeks had sunken in and molded to his gaunt cheekbones, his pink lips had turned raw and red from how he'd constantly chew them in hunger, his clothes they'd bought just before the beginning of the school year hung from his emaciated frame, although the hem of the shirt now rested halfway up his hollowed abdomen and his shorts ended midway down his bony thighs. If he stood, although if he tried to now he would be prevented by the reach of the chain ensnaring him, he would tower over Nell by half a foot.

"How long do I have to be down here?" asked Elijah.

"Not that much longer, sweetie," said Nell. "Just until Momma figures out a way to make you better."

Elijah's upturned nose wrinkled. "Better? What's wrong with me?"

"You're just a little sick, and I wouldn't want you to infect anyone else. That's why you're down here."

"Liar," said Elijah. His voice was sharper, louder. Nell cringed, her eyes darting to the small window at the top of the far wall. It led out into the yard. At the moment, all that could be seen was several inches of snow that'd fallen overnight. If a neighbor or someone walking down the road were to hear raised voices and come to investigate though...

"Keep your voice down, sweetie," Nell said.

Elijah frowned at her. “He said you were keeping us down here as a prisoner, because you think we’re some kind of monster.”

“No.” Nell shook her head. “That’s not...no. I don’t think you’re a monster.”

“Then why’re you keeping me down here? What did I do wrong?”

“Nothing, honey. You did nothing wrong. It’s just, well, after the incident with the hikers, people have been looking for who...um, last saw them. So you can’t be outside or people might suspect you. There’s nothing wrong with you, you’re just...”

“What?” It wasn’t his voice, but something darker. His hands, locked in metal cuffs and snaked through the thick webbing of an old and rusted radiator rooted into the concrete floor, were straining against the chains now, and her eyes watched the metal chain pull taut. She was glad she’d decided to increase the sedative amounts she was dousing his food in. He must have been growing a tolerance to it. “I’m just what?”

Nell kept her voice even and soothing. “You’re just not very good at being subtle yet. You growl every time you see a person, and you were always running off to go hunt. You have to learn how to act normal again, or people will know what you are and try to hurt you. I don’t want anyone to hurt you, baby, that’s why I’m keeping you here so that you’re safe.”

Elijah’s dark eyes searched her face for several moments, trying to seek out any falsaties, but then his face cleared, and the last wisps of his boyish self shone through.

“Of course that’s why,” he said. “I told him you wouldn’t do anything to hurt us.”

Nell’s face smoothed into relief. “I wouldn’t. Of course I wouldn’t. I’m here to help you. That’s why I brought you this.” She lifted the plate she was carrying an inch. Elijah’s eyes immediately locked onto it, and his nose began to twitch.

“Food?” he asked. His eyebrows furrowed, nose still sniffing. “It smells different.”

Nell's fingers tightened around the plate the same as the lines around her smile did. He'd said the same thing three days ago, when she'd increased the sedative amount she'd put in his food before.

"I got the cut of meat from a different donor," Nell said. It was the same excuse she'd used last time, despite the untruth in it. "They all taste and smell different, I guess. You can always tell when we've switched to a new one."

His eyes narrowed at her for a few moments, but it wasn't long before his eyes were magnetized back to the plate. An opaque lid was placed over the plate and sealed at the edges with foil, but now that he knew what was within, his entire attention was riveted to it. Even his body was drawn to the source of the smell, his wrists straining at the chains as he tried to pull closer. Within a few seconds, he would ask for the meal, and then the next breath, demand for it to be given to him, the darkness growing thicker in his voice with each insistence. Nell, from experience, knew not to wait to let him get to the point of demanding. Instead, she placed the plate on the ground and gave it a shove forward. Sliding along the smooth concrete floor, the plate glided all the way to Elijah until it bumped into his feet. Before it even stopped spinning from the force, his hands were upon his prize, ripping open the lid and tearing at what was inside.

Nell turned away, but not before she saw the gush of red explode between his fingers, the drip of it leaking down his chin. Turning did little to lessen the bile rising in her throat. It did nothing to quiet the sound of him feeding, the ripping of teeth through flesh and the heavy gulping swallows. The fervor of it was palpable, the growling and ripping and shattering of plate as he tried to consume it all as quickly as possible. It came with a single upside: she did not have to wait long before it was over. Within two minutes, the entire slab of meat was gone.

“More,” growled Elijah.

“I can’t bring you more right now,” said Nell. “We have to pace ourselves with how quickly we go through the supply. I can’t get so much so quickly. It’ll raise questions and then they’ll find out and come looking for us.”

“Let them come. We’ll kill them and eat them too.”

We, her mind whispered to her. She flinched. She hated being reminded of what was inside of him, if what the Ojibwe man had told her was even true. A dark spirit? Inside of her son? It didn’t seem possible, not her boy, but...But he wasn’t really her boy anymore, was he? At least not completely. He had changed so much.

But there was still some of himself left. She could see small glimmers of it at times. She heard the soft warmth in his voice when he called her; she saw the way his hands sometimes went to twist in the hem of his shirt the way they used to when he was self-conscious; she saw the way he blew his hair out of his eyes like he did when he’d gone too long without a haircut. There was still Elijah in there, and she just had to find a way to get him out.

“That’s not a good idea--”

“I don’t care, I want MORE!” On the last word, he slammed the plate down, making it shatter into a dozen scrambling shards.

Cringing back, Nell tried to soothe him. She begged for him to lower his voice, but instead, he screamed louder, his feet and hands banging on the ground as he raged. Please, she urged him, but he couldn’t hear her over the sound of his rage rushing in his ears, the voice of a monster canceling hers out as it whispered to him darkly.

“Someone will hear, Eli, please!” said Nell.

His fit of rage burned out and he sat huffing, face red, hands and feet just as bloodied as his face from where they'd been cut open from the shattered plate. Despite the flare of violence, she could see that the short burst of physical strain had taken a lot out of him. His shoulders were sagging, and his eyes were growing heavy. The sedatives were beginning to take their effect. His voice punched out in huffed growls when he replied. "More food. Now. I'm hungry. I need--"

He cocked his head, his voice dying with the motion. Ears twitching, his eyes pasted themselves to the ceiling. Seconds later, a knock echoed down from where they looked.

Panic quivered through Nell so hard it made her visibly shake.

*No*, she prayed, *please don't let someone actually have heard him*. It was her worst nightmare made reality. In the span of a second, the dismal life she already lived had bleakened.

The knock had not paralyzed Elijah, or kept him quiet. "*Him*," he growled instead, lip curled in disgust. "He's supposed to be gone for good. You promised." His eyes cut into Nell, suspicious and angry again. "Why is he here?"

*Why is who...?* She wondered for a moment. And then it clicked.

The knocking above rang again, followed by the muffled sound of a raised voice. Even through several layers of wall and floor and dozens of yards of space, she could tell the owner of the voice as well as she could have if he were to stand in front of her.

"Stay quiet," she urged Elijah. She made her way to the staircase in so much of a rush that she nearly forgot to pull the light chain on her way. The fall of darkness made Elijah growl, a hiss of dissent, but she shushed him again and let the sway of the sedatives lull the rest of his waning anger. Climbing the stairs, she reached the door and shut it behind her, leaving him alone in the dark husk of the basement.

“Nelly?” a voice called. It was much clearer above ground, and the sound made her heart quicken. She pressed her back against the basement door to compose herself for a moment, else she would have fallen over. She closed her eyes long enough to pull in a few deep, stabilizing breaths, and then she pushed herself away from the door and toward the sound of the voice.

When she pulled open the front door, the voice calling “Nelly?” cut off halfway through.

Standing there was Ryan. He looked the same as Nell remembered him, only his hair had grown out a little and was curling at the nape of his neck and around his ears and his jaw was free from stubble. Same were the cold-cracked lips and the red splotches peeking out from the top of his shirt collar and the ridiculous hair band he wore to keep his unruly mane out of his face. Same, also, was the warmth spreading through her chest upon seeing him. But then the reality of the situation sank in, and a coldness replaced the warmth.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“Oh, come on, I don’t get a how have you been?” Ryan asked, lips curling. “Or a wow, is that a new shirt, it looks really good on you? Or a hmm, you want to come in, it’s chilly outside?”

Nell crossed her arms. “Why are you here?”

The smile slipped off his face. “Yeah, okay.” He cleared his throat. “The school called me about Elijah. Apparently he hasn’t been there since school got back in after break two weeks ago. They said they called you several times, but you never picked up. Eventually they asked around, and Mrs. Lannis had my number from when I helped with the field day last year so she called me to check up on him. Is everything okay?”

Her fingers dug into her arms. *The school*. She’d forgotten to contact them. Weeks before, when Elijah had hunted those hikers down and Nell was left with no choice but to sedate



him and lock him in the basement to prevent any other incidents that would draw too much suspicion, she'd planned on calling the school to withdraw him and announce he was being homeschooled. It would have been a believable lie; Elijah had begged her half a dozen times that school year alone to be kept home, and the school was more than aware of the troubles he was having with the other kids. But she'd gotten so wrapped up in everything else it took to keep her son safe—the stealing sedative medicine from work, the soundproofing of the basement walls, the gathering of food—that she'd completely forgotten about the simple step of picking up the phone and calling the school.

Ryan frowned at her. “Nell, everything is alright with Elijah, right?” His eyes drifted past her shoulder, as if to search for the boy in question.

Her head snapped up. “Fine. Everything is fine.” She moved to center herself in his line of vision again.

“Are you sure? You seem a little shaken up.”

“I’m fine, it’s just—work, there’s just a lot of work lately.”

“So much that you can’t take your son to school?” It was supposed to be a joke, but his tone fell to flat for it to land. His eyes were just as flat, the worry evident. Ryan took a step forward, his hand lifting to her shoulder.

She stepped back to avoid it. “I said it’s fine, okay?”

The sharpness of her tone made him drop his hand. “Yeah, okay. I got it. I just came to check on you guys. It was worrying, to hear something might be up.” His eyes flickered behind her again. She got the sudden urge to look back, to check if there was actually anything there to see. But, no, her mind said. There’s no way Elijah could have gotten out. The sedative had to have set in by now.

“Well there’s no need to worry,” said Nell, barring her arm against the door frame to block his view and draw his attention back to her. It worked. “Elijah’s homeschooled now. I guess I just forgot to let the school know. I’ll call tomorrow so they’ll stop worrying.”

“Homeschooled?” he asked. “Did something else bad happen?”

“Nothing more than usual. You know how it’s been for him. He’s been asking for this for years. I should have listened sooner. Maybe it would have...” She didn’t let her mind stray too far. It could only catch on something she didn’t want to face. “Maybe it would have made him happier.”

“He’s happy now then?”

Her lips pressed together to stop them from trembling. “Happier,” she lied.

“Good.” He nodded. “That’s good.”

A pause. An uncertain look. “Can I see him?” he asked.

“No.” The answer was too fast and clipped. Ryan must have noticed something else that suggested there was something wrong: a panic in her eyes or the tenseness of her hands where they strained around her arms. His eyebrows came down over his eyes, and he stood straight.

“Nell, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she said. “Everything’s fine.”

He moved to say something, but reconsidered it with a pause. “Is Elijah really okay?”

“I said everything was fine, didn’t I?”

His lips pulled thin. “Let me see him.”

She swallowed. “You can’t, he’s sleeping—”

“Then wake him up.”

Her eyes scattered as she tried to think of another excuse, something that he couldn't argue, something that would make him turn around and leave. "I can't. He's...there's..."

Ryan planted a hand flat on the face of the door and effortlessly sent it banging back into the wall. Nell lost her balance as the knob jerked from her hand, and before she could right herself, Ryan had swept by her and into the house. He strode straight toward Elijah's bedroom.

"What are you—" said Nell. Ryan either didn't hear or didn't care, because he kept going. "You're not allowed to just storm in here. Get out!"

He reached her son's room and pulled the door open. Pausing, he turned back to her. "Where is he?"

She jerked her chin up and stared him straight on. "Get out."

His voice grew thin of patience. "Nell. I asked you a question. Now answer: where is he?"

"I said he's sleeping." Her voice was peaky.

"He's not in bed."

"He's in mine," she lied. "He had a nightmare."

He turned toward her room.

"No!" She threw herself at him and wrapped her arms around his bicep. "You're going to disturb him."

He tried to shake her off. "I just want to check that he's okay, and then I'll leave."

"You're leaving *now*. It's my house, and you can't come in here. We don't want you here anymore."

His hand wrapped around her wrist to pry it off. "Nell, just get off—"

Nell yelped and tore her hands away. Ryan's eyes went wide.

Her arm hung at her side, building the fuzzy buzz of static. Above, her shoulder throbbed where Ryan had pulled it out of socket.

“I hadn’t meant to—” he said. His hand reached toward her, but when she jerked back, her good arm moving to shield her throbbing one, he let it drop.

Tears prickled at her eyes. “Get out.”

This time, he didn’t move to oppose her. “Nell, I swear I wasn’t trying to hurt you. Are you...is it okay?”

“I want you to leave. Right now.”

“Let me get you some ice or something.”

“No, you’ve done enough here.”

“I—”

“You just don’t know when to quit, do you? You never learn.”

His mouth pulled into a frown. “I just want to help, Nell, I...”

“That’s always how you look at it. As helping. But have you ever considered it’s just the opposite?” She squeezed her eyes shut and sighed. “I’ve asked you to leave a dozen times now, but here you still are.”

“I wanted to see if Elijah was okay. The arm thing wasn’t meant to happen. You wouldn’t let me see him, so I accidentally used too much force, and I’m sorry.”

“I didn’t let you see him because he hates you!”

“What?”

“He hates you. All you ever did was pressure him. ‘You need to get out more.’ ‘Don’t you want to play with the others?’ ‘You’re going to regret not doing this later.’ ‘I hated the scouts at first too, but I loved it once I stuck it out. That’s all you have to do. Besides, you don’t

want to be seen as a quitter, do you?’ Day in, day out, always pestering. Couldn’t you just let him be, let him do what he wanted to? He’s a kid. He should be able to be happy without being forced to be something he’s not. It’s not like you’re his father or anything. You were just my boyfriend. You were nothing to him, you had no right! If you hadn’t always pressured him, maybe he wouldn’t have wished so hard for that thing to—” She broke off. She was shaking, her chest pumping rapidly, entire body a bowstring just on the edge of snapping. There were tears in her eyes too, and running down her cheeks, and swimming around her mouth.

His voice was so soft she barely heard him say her name.

“Just get out,” she finally managed. “Get out.”

He didn’t protest. He stepped around her, giving her a wide berth. He drew away from her toward the door and looked back, eyes disappointed, before opening and closing the door behind him.

Alone, Nell sunk to the floor and wrapped her good arm around her knees. She was crying, and her arm hurt, and she was shaking so much she could almost hear the way her body was moving the air around her. But Elijah was alright. Her baby was okay, locked away where no one, even himself, could hurt him. And that was all that mattered.